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A Contribution to a Conversation About Esthetic Education

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1. To recapitulate briefly. Esthetic education is connected above all with development of the power of *imagination*, understood not as the ability to think up what does not exist but as the ability (skill) to see what does exist, what lies before one's eyes. And this is not an innate but an acquired skill, with different levels of development. The ability to see what in fact exists is not a whit more common than the ability to think subtly and deeply. As Goethe said: "What is the hardest thing in the world? To see with one's own eyes what lies before them."

A person who lacks imagination—more precisely, who has an undeveloped imagination—sees in the world around him only what he already knows beforehand, what is registered in verbal form in his consciousness, in his mind.

For very often the real concrete situation that a person runs into is for him not an object of attentive examination but merely an external trigger that activates readymade verbal stereotypes in his consciousness. That is why it is not interesting to listen to such a person's verbal report of what he has seen. He simply repeats what we have already heard thousands of times; he will tell us nothing new, although in fact he may have witnessed a very

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interesting and unusual event. Of such a person it is said: he *looked* but he *did not see*. And this means that in the given case the power of imagination is underdeveloped.

2. In one of his notes, the poet B. Pasternak formulated an observation that is at first glance very unexpected but actually very profound: “The tyrant is a man lacking in imagination.” Here he had in view, of course, not only the “tyrant” in the direct political sense, in the sense of the despotic ruler (although the statement applies to him as well). It is possible to be a tyrant in the family, in relation to animals, and even in relation to so-called dead nature—to woodland, to water, to mineral resources.

What is important is that in all cases the tyrant tries to impose upon the world around him his own selfish, egoistic will. And he usually does so *not* out of evil intent but simply because such a character is unable to “put himself in another’s shoes”—to imagine the real consequences of his active intervention in the course of events. So he forces his way through reality like a bulldozer until such time as he either gets bogged down in resistance that he cannot overcome or else breaks his own neck.

3. The power of imagination can therefore be defined as the ability to *see things through the eyes of another person* (without, of course, turning into him in reality), *through the eyes of all other people, through the eyes of mankind*, and to see not from the point of view of my individual interests, needs, and desires, but from the point of view of the long-term interests of the human “race.”

In this respect, the esthetically developed power of imagination is connected with the mysterious feeling of *beauty* that has always given theoretical esthetics and philosophy so much trouble. But there is a solution to the puzzle.

Kant already understood the feeling of beauty as a peculiar kind of feeling of the harmony of parts with the whole and, in the final analysis, with the supreme goal of human development—human culture. Formally he defined beauty as the sensation of *goal-conformity without the concept of any kind of definite goal*—that is, as the sensation of goal-conformity in general, of supreme goal-conformity.

Developing the rational kernel of this understanding, Marx formulated the secret of the feeling of beauty in a more definite fashion by showing that this feeling arises on the basis of a specifically human relation to the outside world and to the substance of nature. In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), he declared:

Animals produce only according to the standards and needs of the species to which they belong, while man is capable of producing *freely*—that is, without being tied in advance by his own biological-physiological orga-

nization—according to the standards of every species and of applying to each object its inherent standard; hence, man also produces in accordance with the laws of *beauty*.¹

This point is, undoubtedly, crucial both to the problem of beauty and to the problem of the essence of “esthetic education.” The feeling of beauty is, indeed, connected with the specifically human capability of approaching each object not with schemas set out in advance, but with a developed ability to reckon each time with the character of the work material (with its form and measure), which is always new, particular, and unique.

The feeling of *beauty* enters here as one of the most important mental mechanisms characteristic of truly human life activity, in whatever special sphere this life activity may occur—a *criterion of the human character* of an individual’s relation to an object, be it in mathematics or in politics, in industry or in everyday life.

By way of conclusion, let me cite another very serious and profound definition of the essence of esthetic education:

“Truly esthetic education is the stern learning of the human race from the experience of its productive activity.”²

Thus understood, esthetic education has the most direct relation to a multitude of problems. Consider, for instance, the problem of education in *internationalism*. For in words each of us knows that all peoples [ethnic groups] of the world have equal rights, that they all have the right to cultural, economic, and political development, and so on and so forth. But in practice the situation is not so good in this respect. Everywhere, we come across a lack of elementary understanding of the specific psychology of one or another ethnic group: very many people are accustomed to judging everything according to their own standards. There is often a lack of the power of imagination needed to appreciate the point of view of those belonging to another ethnic group, to look at things through their eyes. And this quite often leads to political misunderstandings and other very unfortunate consequences. It is hardly necessary to demonstrate that an enormous role in the solution of this problem can and must be played precisely by *art*.

Or consider an exchange that I heard about recently. A group of Japanese industrialists had come to Moscow, and in the course of conversation they happened to mention that in postwar Japan the elementary schools had given top priority to esthetic education in terms of teaching hours, scope of curriculum, and financial provision. Why? “It is very simple,” one very bright big entrepreneur replied, the head of a large Japanese company, one of the bosses of the postwar Japanese economy. “Our worker can distinguish 700 shades of color, while yours can only distinguish 7. For that reason we are

happy to give you licenses and technology and you will be able to do nothing with that technology. The same with transistor receivers. Your worker does not possess the *spatial imagination* necessary to assemble them—the ability to project a diagram drawn in two dimensions into the three dimensions of space.”

I say all this in order to suggest to you a somewhat broader view of the task and essence of esthetic education. Singing, drawing, literature, the plastic arts—all of these are means, merely means for the development of such a universal capability as *productive imagination*, oriented toward the feeling of beauty, toward a feeling that enables people, immediately and without long reflexion, confidently to develop beauty and ugliness, mastery of the material free from the whims of individual caprice. Thus understood, esthetic education appears as a necessary component of any creativity, of any creative-human relation to the surrounding world.

Notes

1. K. Marks [Marx] and F. Engel's [Engels], *Iz rannikh proizvedenii* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1956), p. 566. [Translation is based on the English-language version available at www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm.]

2. *Ibid.*, p. 339.